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ABSTRACT

Intended to give basic students simultaneous practice in reading and writing with an emphasis on accuracy, conciseness, and precision, the "finding the beef" method centers itself on summaries of news events. The first step of the method is to supply students with the appropriate data blocks based on news events, preferably those relating to public meetings and reports of public bodies, and those relating to one-time occurrences, such as accidents or fires. Students assume the role of reporters and attempt to write a summary of the information presented. They determine the most important information, then express their judgments about key information in the form of brief or telegraphic sentences. One of these kernel sentences becomes the capstone of a subsequent 30-word summary paragraph. If time permits, data blocks may be used to generate two- and three-paragraph summaries. When students are ready to move on to more inferential reading and writing, they can read and summarize newspaper editorials. Finally, students can generate their own data blocks from personal experiences, and use the "find the beef" method to write descriptive essays. (Sample data blocks, kernel sentences, and summaries are included.) (HTH)

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Finding the Beef: A Journalistic Summary Method for the Basic Writer

The journalistic method of writing summaries I develop below is designed for teachers of basic writing at the secondary or college level: teachers who would like to give students simultaneous practice in reading and writing and who value emphasis on accuracy, conciseness, and precision in their students' writing. I assume here that the basic writer needs to sharpen both reading and writing skills — both the data-block source material which the student has to analyze and the summaries he or she writes serve this assumption. In addition, I share the conviction felt by many writing teachers that the ability to summarize — whether a set of given facts or a student-developed list of personal significance is the raw material — requires cognitive skills essential for the practice of all of the common expository and argumentative writing modes. I believe that basic writers who practice summary writing intensely — even for a fairly short period of time — will be better prepared to move into the standard modes. Opportunities for persona development and pre-writing become added bonuses of the method.

The "Finding the Beef" method centers itself on summaries of news events, because it is intended for a short-term classroom experience of perhaps only two to three weeks. As described here, it includes detailed discussion only of summaries of news events based on teacher-generated data blocks, but student-generated data blocks are highly recommended as part of the experience if time permits. Although they are not discussed here, the method will also easily accommodate summaries of analytic or predictive journalistic articles. Note that the method is broad enough in scope (if time is available) to include James Moffett's "what happened," "what happens," and "what may happen" (Teaching the Universe of Discourse, 35 ff.).

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A. OVERVIEW OF THE METHOD

1. Data Blocks

The first step of the method is to supply students with the appropriate data blocks based on news events. Two kinds of news events are most useful: those which relate to public meetings and reports of public bodies or commissions (e.g., City Councils, IRS, FBI, etc.), and those which relate to one-time occurrences, such as accidents or fires. It is important to make sure that the information from the events is "scrambled" in the data blocks, rather than retaining the form of the news article. So-called "straight news" articles tend to follow some combination of a topical/temporal organizational pattern, and the first paragraph or "lead" of the story is in itself, in most cases, a summary. It is best, then, to clip news articles from newspapers or other sources and to create data blocks from them. (Where possible, source and date of the information should be given in the data block.) After students have written their own summaries, a teacher can share the original articles for comparison/contrast if desired. The data block itself should try to be as "disorganized" as possible, because the first challenge for the student is to decide what the central point of the information is. (See Section B below for sample data blocks and student writing.)

2. Writer's Role

For their summary work, I ask students to assume the role of reporters for their local daily newspaper. Students, as reporters, are to maintain a neutral stance towards all information presented. They must also seek to include the major points of data blocks in their summaries, and to avoid supplying information which is not contained in the data block. In addition, they are to avoid expressions of personal opinion. Their early efforts at summary writing provide numerous opportunities to reinforce the reportorial role.

1. "Finding the Beef"

Once the student has the data block in hand and has determined his or her reportorial role, the first task is to read the block carefully and to underline or otherwise indicate its most important information. I suggest two complementary approaches here:

a. Students should apply components of the "Reporter's Formula" (Who, What, When, Where, Why, How) to the data block. In most cases, Who, What, and When will be most important, and should be immediately identified.

b. They should then apply the Inverted Pyramid (with which I assume most teachers are familiar) or some other convenient yardstick to help them determine which information in the block is most newsworthy. Common criteria of "news" which can be discussed and applied are: most unusual information, most recent, most important to most people generally, most important to most people locally, and so on. These criteria, singly or in combination, usually help students decide very quickly (after a little practice) what information they wish to emphasize in their summaries.

4. "Who's Kicking Who" Kernel Sentences

As soon as students have "found the beef," or at least a significant portion of it, they are ready to express their judgments about key information in the form of brief or telegraphic sentences. I call these "Who's Kicking Who" sentences, after the first chapter of Richard Lanham's Revising Prose. The goal is to develop very brief "kernel sentences" which express the essential information of the block in the basic S/V/C pattern of the English sentence. I insist that these kernel sentences must have strong and specific subjects, verbs and complements — and that each should try to capture Lanham's "who's kicking who" concept as completely as possible. (Who's kicking who" is Lanham's way of asking who the specific actors are in any event, what the action precisely is, and who exactly is being affected.) Kernel sentences, then, need to identify the major

actors, the major action, and any complementary qualifiers or receivers of the action. Although several kernel sentences should be written for each data block, the goal is to choose one sentence which appears to do the best job of expressing the essential "who's kicking who."

5. Choosing the "Kernel" Kernel Sentence

In fact, the choice of the final kernel sentence is so important I believe it should be a separate step: students should consciously decide which of several kernel sentences they wish to use as the core of their summary or "capstone" sentence. This decision is doubly important because it helps the writer "take charge" of the summary he or she is about to write.

6. Composing the Capstone Sentence: First Draft

The student is now ready to try to compose the first draft of the capstone sentence — which, in the one-paragraph 30-word summary described below, is all there is to the summary. No word or sentence limit need be imposed for this first draft, but I recommend that the first draft include no more than two sentences and 50 words — otherwise, the task of revision becomes more complicated.

Useful suggestions for composing the first draft include:

— the importance of maintaining the reportorial role.

— the importance of strong subject, verb, and complement which come first in the sentence (students should be warned about "backing in" to the main point of the summary by starting with secondary information).

— the importance of accuracy, conciseness, and precision (common pitfalls include factual errors, omission of important information, lack of specificity).

7. Revising the Capstone Sentence: the 30-Word Summary

The end product of the "Finding the Beef" Method is the 30-word summary: a one-

sentence paragraph which expresses the information of the kernel sentence as completely, precisely, and concisely as possible. As an aid to the revision process, the teacher might review with students a selection of first paragraphs, or "leads," from current news articles. Students should note that the standard news lead is usually an excellent example of the "who's kicking who" approach, though it may exceed 30 words on occasion. (Most good news leads, though, are less than 30 words long.)

Some helpful hints for revising:

— be sure that all secondary information is eliminated.

— watch out for "labels": "The city council met last night" merely labels the event without describing any action taken.

— eliminate "lard," Lanham's term for excessive verbiage. An excellent way to do this is to avoid passive verbs and to make sure that subjects are strong and specific.

Sufficient practice usually permits most students to write final capstone sentences which come in well under 30 words. Summaries of 20 words are possible for students who have had some practice. At first — especially if the first draft is too long — students may be somewhat frustrated by the need to keep the capstone sentence under 30 words.

8. Using the News Source

In some data blocks, the news source ("who said it") may be important: if the governor announcess that he or she plans to raise state income taxes, for instance, a summary should indicate that the governor will play an important role in the action. But working with the source may complicate matters for many basic writers, at least at first. I recommend that the first data blocks be developed from news articles about one-time "observable" events, such as fires and accidents. The fact that a fire has occurred, and the extent of damage, usually does not need to be attributed to any source, since it is a readily-verifiable

event. The cause of a fire or accident has to be attributed to a source -- but few 30-word summaries will discuss cause, so the problem usually does not arise. In summaries involving a report by a body or commission or some official statement, students can work with a few simple "attribution tags," such as "according to...." These tags will provide the necessary "who said it." But note that the summary should not usually begin with the attribution. In almost all cases, it's most effective to begin with the essential "who's kicking who."

9. Some Options

a. Two- and Three-Paragraph Summaries: should time permit and the teacher wish to give students additional practice in writing short compositions, data blocks will usually accommodate summaries of two and three paragraphs. Here is a useful procedure:

— assign the 30-word capstone paragraph (one sentence only). This will become the "lead" or first paragraph of the composition.

— then assign second and third paragraphs (max. 40 words and two sentences each). Use the inverted pyramid to help generate kernel sentences for the extra paragraphs. Students can number their kernels 1-2-3 to help them determine which kernel will go where in the composition. The second and third paragraphs will then each address a "subtopic" of the capstone paragraph.

b. Editorial Summaries: for students who are ready to move into more inferential reading and writing, a project which asks them to read and summarize newspaper editorials is very helpful. It isn't always necessary to develop data blocks from original editorials, since many editorials have diffused, delayed, or even implied thesis statements. In editorials of this type, students can work directly from copies of the editorial. An editorial which contains its thesis in the first paragraph (akin to the standard news lead) might be reduced to a data

block.

c. Self-Generated Data Blocks: since the core method asks students to work with the writing of other writers, teachers who wish to have students work more with self-discovery might try self-generated data blocks. For these, some simple invention heuristic is necessary: the list is usually an appropriate one. A useful subject for invention and self-generated data blocks is personal history — focuses might include an important person in students' lives, or a significant life event. The list will then provide a means for building a data block about this experience. The completed data block, of course, then becomes raw material for summary of the experience. The "Finding the Beef" Method can take over from there. I recommend that the completed data block be in sentence form.

B. SAMPLE MATERIALS

Data Blocks

1. The International Standardization Organization, which is composed of acoustics experts, today opened its annual convention. The convention is meeting in Geneva, Switzerland. Delegates from 51 countries are attending the convention, which will continue through Sunday. An annual report issued by the organization warned that noise levels in the world are rising by one decibel a year. If the increase continues, the report warned, "everyone living in cities could be stone deaf by the year 2000." The report also said that long-term exposure to a noise level of 100 decibels can cause deafness, yet a riveting gun reaches a level of 130 decibels and a jet aircraft 150.

2. The City Council met at 7 o'clock last night. The mayor called the meeting to order and read the minutes of the last meeting. All 12 councilmen were present. They approved the minutes of the last meeting. They discussed raising the salaries of police and firemen by 7% but tabled the motion until their next meeting. By a vote of 7 to 5 the council approved a controversial plan to begin a city income tax next January 1. The tax will take 1% of every paycheck issued within the city limits. Councilmen who favor the bill pointed out that the tax will affect persons who work in the city and use the city's facilities but do not live in the city.

Kernel Sentences

1. Acoustics experts meet in Geneva.
   Standardization organization issues report.
   People living in cities could be deaf by 2000.
   Noise levels are rising by one decibel a year.

2. The city council met last night.
   City council minutes were approved.
   Salary proposal will be postponed.
   A 1% city income tax will begin January 1.

"Kernel" Kernel Sentence

1. People living in cities could be deaf by 2000.
2. A 1% city income tax will begin January 1.

Capstone Sentence: First Drafts

1. According to a group of acoustics experts meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, everyone living in cities could be deaf by the year 2000 because of the gradual increase in noise levels. Noise levels are going up by 1 decibel a year. (40 words)
2. The city council met last night and decided that, beginning next January 1, everyone working within the city limits will have to pay a special city income tax of 1%. This tax will affect all persons working within the city whether they live in the city or not. (48 words)

30-Word Summaries

1. People living in cities could be deaf by 2000 because of increasing world noise levels, acoustics experts meeting in Geneva have reported. (22 words)
2. The city council last night approved a 1% city income tax on all paychecks issued in the city after next January 1. (22 words)

For Practice

The Tax Foundation has its headquarters located in the city of New York, and it has just released the results of some research about the topic of taxes. The main point of its research is the amount of taxes people pay, and its findings may be alarming to many. The main finding of the foundation is that taxes are the biggest single item in most families' budgets and that the average family pays more for taxes than it pays for housing, food, transportation, or medical care. In fact, if you are an average worker-taxpayer, every dollar you earn between the date of January 1 and May 1 goes to pay your taxes — federal, state and local. Or, viewed another way, if you work eight hours a day, all the money you earn during the first two hours and thirty-nine minutes of your daily work is required to pay your tax bills, and that is an increase of four minutes over last year's total.

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